

THE LIGHTHOUSES OF CAPE COD

Cape Cod is a long peninsular forming the easterly extremity of Massachusetts. It makes out from the mainland, first in an easterly direction for thirty-one miles and then northward for a little over twenty miles. This latter portion is generally termed the Hook of the Cape, and is composed almost entirely of sandy lands, with high, bare hills of sand and low, nearly level plains. The name Cape Cod applies to the south coast of Massachusetts between Chatham and Falmouth, as well as the land extending northerly from Chatham.

Plymouth is not on Cape Cod, though some insist in so considering it. There is a clear-cut dividing line between Cape Cod and the main body of Massachusetts, and this is the Cape Cod Canal. If the canal were not there the eight miles of land through which it now runs would just as truly be the dividing line. However, Plymouth is near the Cape and is on Cape Cod Bay, so that possibly it is excusable to include the interesting lighthouses of "The Gurnet" off Plymouth in this chapter.

The Gurnet (or Gurnet Point as it is likewise known) juts out in a long narrow point from the Duxbury shore at the northern side of the entrance to Plymouth Bay. The inhabitants of Plymouth and Duxbury, according to a record dated in 1678, called it "ye Gurnett's Nose." In a history of Duxbury it was described as containing "about twenty-seven acres of good soil." Mentioning

the name it goes on to say, "The name is derived from the gurnet-fish, which abounds in great numbers on the coast of Devonshire, England; and in the English Channel there are several headlands bearing the name . . . and from one of these, it is probable, the Gurnet of Plymouth received its name, which was early given to it by the Pilgrims."

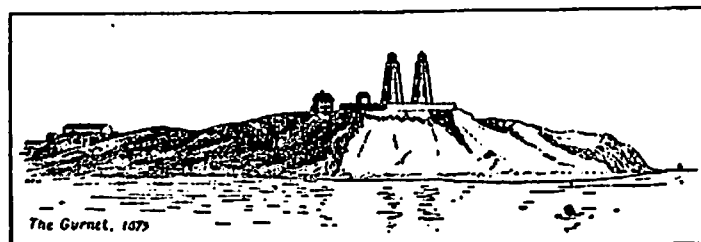
An interesting legend connected with "ye Gurnett's Nose" has it that Thorwald, son of Eric the Red, sailed through Cape Cod Bay in the spring of 1004 and came to what some have identified as Gurnet Point, which was at that time covered with woods. The spot so charmed him that he exclaimed, "This is a beautiful spot, and here I should like to fix my dwelling." Soon afterward he was wounded in a skirmish with the native Indians, and seeing that his hurts were fatal he told his companions to carry him to the point and there bury him with one cross at his head and another at his feet, saying "It may be that it was a prophetic word, which fell from my mouth, about abiding there for a season." He was buried according to his wishes.

On February 17, 1768 the legislature of Massachusetts Bay passed an act authorizing the building of a lighthouse on the Gurnet. The house was accordingly constructed and the lights first exhibited in the following year. The structure was thirty feet long, twenty feet high and fifteen feet wide. It showed one light in either end,—each light consisting of two lamps with four large wicks in each.

The lighthouse figured to a small extent in the Revo-

lution, which came but a few years after the station was built. Justin Winsor's "History of Duxbury" of 1849 says that a "fort was, early in this year (1776) built at the *Gurnet* by the towns of Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury. . . No attack, it is believed, was made on this during the war. A few shots, however, were exchanged with the British frigate "Niger". . . and at this time one of the balls from the frigate pierced the lighthouse; and the vessel grounded on Brown's Island Shore, but soon got off." Brown's Island is now "Brown's Bank" the island having entirely disappeared. It lies across the channel from the Gurnet and has little water over it.

The lighthouse stood for some time and was a useful aid; it was still in use when ceded to the Federal Govern-



ment on June 10, 1790. At the time of cession the keeper was a woman, Mrs. Thomas. The act ceding the light mentions "the lighthouse situate on the Gurnet-head," bearing out the fact that the first two lights were exhibited from a single building. In 1793 the pay of the keeper was fixed at "200 doll."

This lighthouse burned down on the evening of July 2, 1801, and it was 1803 before it was replaced. The

new station, like its predecessor, showed two fixed white lights about seventy feet above the water.

The lights of 1803 were in use when Captain Edward W. Carpender made an examination of the lights in this locality, a report of which was dated November 1, 1838. Carpender felt that radical changes should be made at the Gurnet, and reported that the lights "require to be double, to distinguish them from the single light at Barnstable. They are in two separate towers, 22 feet high and 30 feet apart." These lights were an improvement over the original ones and consisted of six lamps each, with the old type 8½-inch reflectors arranged in circular form "so as to suit the harbor as well as sea navigation. . . The objection to these lights is that they are too near together, by which they blend, and appear to be single at a short distance; and that, being horizontal, they are liable to come into range with each other, by which, also, they appear single."

In this connection, a few years before the date of this report a vessel had been lost northward of the Gurnet; the captain protested that only one light had been burning, and that he was thus deceived as to his bearings. As a matter of fact, both lights were burning, but they happened to have been on such a bearing that one hid the other.

Captain Carpender proposed to eliminate this objection, (which was similar to that which caused a change at Matinicus Rock in Maine some years later), by constructing a new tower sixty feet high with two lights arranged vertically, one at the top and the other fifteen

feet from the base and outside of the tower itself. The land at the site which he proposed was fifty feet high. In mentioning the towers then in use, Carpender said that "they are of wood, and somewhat decayed, so that it would not be much of a sacrifice to demolish them." He suggested that the new tower and an adjacent dwelling be of stone or brick. This whole suggestion, had it been carried out, would have defeated its own purpose. One difficulty with lights arranged vertically is the difference in their ranges of visibility; with forty-five feet between those proposed, the upper light would have been seen in clear weather several miles farther than the lower, so that from a distance only one light would have been visible,—the very objection Carpender himself had voiced regarding those then in use.

In 1843, however, when Mr. I. W. P. Lewis made his vigorous report, nothing further had been done to the Gurnet Lights. He found them "in a state of partial ruin," and said that they required rebuilding. Captain Sturgis of the revenue cutter on the Boston station, had written a letter in the previous year regarding their condition, in which he said that they were old and in "so decayed a state as to be unworthy of repair." Mr. Stephen Pleasanton also took note of their condition and wrote to Hon. John P. Kennedy, (then Chairman of the Committee on Commerce in the House of Representatives), "I am much afraid they will fall to the ground in the course of the summer."

Consequently in 1843 they were replaced by new pyramidal, octagonal towers which, contrary to Mr.

Carpender's suggestion, were built of wood like the former ones and placed quite close together.

In 1871 there was a complaint that these lights were too small, (they were sixth order, the smallest sized regular Fresnel lens) and "when seen at all" resembled the lights of a dwelling house. Larger lenses were recommended and later installed.

Recently one of the two Plymouth (Gurnet) lights was discontinued, and the remaining lighthouse shows a single and double flash alternately,—the single flash appearing every twenty seconds. This secondary sea-coast light (37,000 candlepower) is elevated 102 feet above the sea and is visible sixteen miles. The tower is white, with a white dwelling, and is itself thirty-nine feet high. The fog signal is a first class reed horn giving a three-second blast every fifteen seconds. An auxiliary bell (double stroke every thirty seconds) is also maintained. The light is shown from the old southeast tower, and the unused tower has been removed.

This light station was never important except as a guide for vessels entering or leaving Plymouth Harbor, but in late years it has become vastly more important because of the much greater amount of traffic which passes this point in running to and from the Cape Cod Canal. The old station became inadequate for the demands of this increased shipping and hence the changes in characteristic and illuminating apparatus.

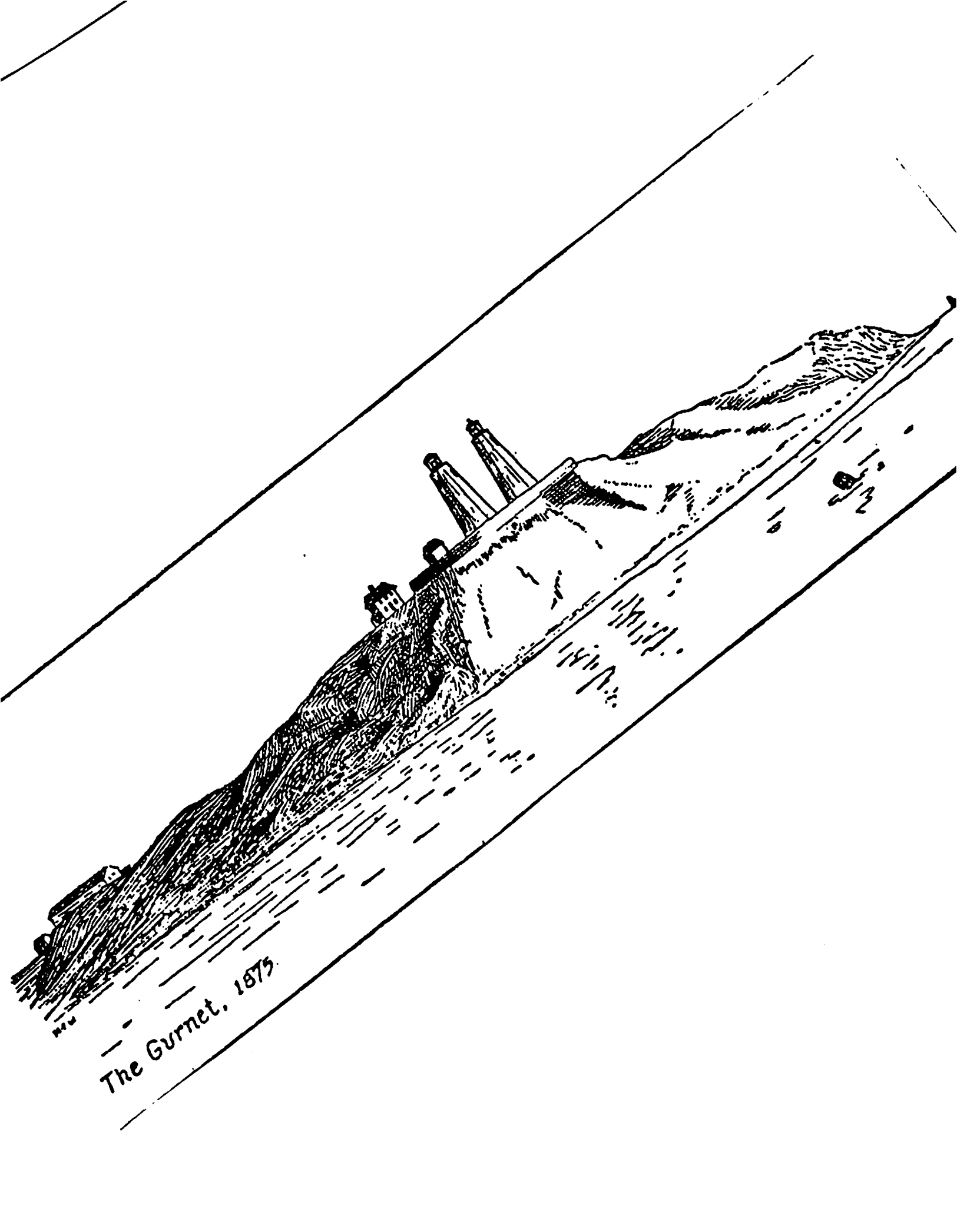
Across Cape Cod Bay from the Gurnet is a shallow harbor leading to Wellfleet, a small town in the middle of the forearm, so to speak, of Cape Cod. A harbor light

was under construction there when Captain Carpenter made his examination in 1838. He considered this lighthouse at "Mayo's Beach" almost useless so far as aiding navigation was concerned because at that time traffic into Wellfleet did not warrant or even require a light. He recommended that construction be abandoned.

The station was completed, however, and served for many years, though Stephen Pleasanton in 1843 recommended its discontinuance. As is quite often the case on sandy shores, trouble was experienced from encroachment of the sea at Mayo Beach, and by 1878 the water had so undermined the keeper's dwelling that \$8,000 was asked for the purpose of rebuilding the structure. Apparently this request met with no response for it was repeated the following year. By July 1880, however, materials for the new dwelling as well as for a new tower had been purchased. The buildings were erected shortly on a more suitable location at the head of Wellfleet Harbor and the old buildings removed.

Encroachment was soon experienced in the new location, and in 1895 fifty loads of loam were placed about the dwelling to prevent further undermining by the sea. A heavy bulkhead was put up as additional protection but this was carried away in the storm of November, 1898 when it was practically new. It was rebuilt in the next year, and still more soil was placed about the station.

Traffic in the vicinity of Mayo Beach Light has not warranted the expense of maintaining this aid and it has been discontinued recently.



The Gurnet. 1875.